

This was the final project for the Ethnomusicology 20C (Musical Cultures of the World: Asia) course, taught by Professor Katherine In-Young Lee in Fall 2021 at UCLA. Students worked in groups to research and conduct an oral history with one of seven Asian and Asian American musicians. Each of the narrators are highly esteemed musicians with long professional careers in music performance. They also serve as important liaisons between their home countries in East, South, and Southeast Asia and the United States.

Profile of Rita Sahai

Rita Sahai is an exceptional Hindustani vocalist residing in the San Francisco Bay Area in the United States. Sahai was born in Allahabad, India and at the age of 9 at which she began training in the Benares Gharana from Pandit Rama Shakar Mishra. Sahai is now a prolific composer, performer, and a venerated music teacher. She is a senior disciple of Sangeet Samrat Ustad Ali Akbar Khan Saheb, and remains the only vocalist and composer to carry forward the heritage of the Seni Allauddin Gharana. After arriving in the United States, Ritaji continued her musical journey under the world renowned sarod maestro late Ustad Ali Akbar Khan where she trained in the Seni Allaudin Gharana style. Impressed by her talent and passion towards music, Khan Sahib gave her the title “Gayan Alankar ” meaning Jewel of Music.

Today, she tours throughout the US, UK, Canada, and India, spreading the beauty of Indian classical music. She often records and performs on pieces of other artists ranging from bluegrass to jazz. However, she also produces her own CDs and in 2003, Sahai’s Rangamalika was nominated for a Grammy. Rita has conducted several classes across the Bay Area and is a faculty member at UC Davis, in the department of Ethnomusicology where she is the director of two choir groups: the UC Davis Hindustani Ensemble and the Vasundhara Choir. Rita has also taught music at Ali Akbar College of Music, San Jose State University, Mills College and UC Berkeley as well as a course on creative world music at San Francisco State University.

Oral History Interview Transcript: Rita Sahai

Saveena Patel: Hi my name is Saveena Patel

Jasmine Watkins: Hi I’m Jasmine Watkins

Dakota Dry: Hi I’m Dakota Dry

Saveena Patel: And it is currently 6:30pm and we are located in Los Angeles, California. And with that, this is Hindustani vocalist and composer Rita Sahai, who is located in Berkeley, California.

Jasmine Watkins: We are so honored to have you here Rita, and thank you again for setting aside time in your busy schedule. I’d like to start us off by asking if you can give us an introduction of who you are, and a little background on your musical journey, and what made you decide to pursue Hindustani music professionally?

Rita Sahai: Alright, I am Rita Sahai and I am a North Indian vocalist and since my childhood I used to sing Bollywood songs in my early childhood. Everyone used to like it very much, so they suggested to my father that they should give me proper training because I was singing so good proper classical training. So that's why it all got decided from age of nine, eight or nine, I started learning proper classical training in India. That's where it started. And you know, in every cultural functions, festivals, I was asked to sing. So it was just like I had no choice. I was called to sing, so I had to sing. So it was like you know, something was happening if people ask you all the time to sing, sing, sing, you get better and better and better. So this is what happened. And then when I was about thirteen, fourteen years old, my father said: "you know people say you sing very good, you are very good but I will consider you good when you enter in a competition and win the competition". So he entered me in an "All India Music Competition" and so we started preparing, and I had no idea what it was you know, and I came first in "All India Music Competition." So that's the way the journey started. You know I was not intending to be a singer or anything, it just things started happening and that's the way it all began. And then I did my bachelors and masters in music. There also, it's the same thing happened, I was kept invited, all the time I would get invitation to come perform. So I have been, then I got married, then I had to come leave the country and come here. Then somebody said "Oh, Pandit Ravi Shankar lives in California, so if you're going you know you can contact him and learn from him." So, I was looking for Pandit Ravi Shankar, and I ended up finding Ustad Ali Akbar Khan, so and he was right here, and I joined his college and within two years he made me his disciple, and he gave me all the attention what I needed to become to groom me. And that's where it all started. So I had not thought that I'd be a classical singer, but I became. I mean that does not mean I did not like the music, I love music, and I used to dream about music. And I, as a child when I used to hear big musicians, I you know singers singing, I always thought with a confidence that if I practice, I can sing better than them. I had that you know I could see where they were making mistake. I was child you know, but I could say "if I practice and get proper training, I can do better than them." So, that's the way it all happened. Okay?

Saveena Patel: Wow, that is a beautiful answer. Thank you so much for sharing.

Rita Sahai: Okay good

Saveena Patel: Our next question is: We see that you've trained in both Benares and Seni Allaudin gharanas. Can you please describe some of the differences between the two, and how they've impacted your musical journey and technique?

Rita Sahai: Okay with um Benares gharana, in fact if you go back three, four hundred years, then it's all the same gharana. Means you know there is one father, and he has four children, and four children go to different places and they start their own school. So, main singer was Miyan Tansen you might have heard. Miyan Tansen was there. And um Benares Gharanas lineage is also from Miyan Tansen, and Allaudin Seni Gharana is also from Miyan Tansen. So, at the end, they all meet there... they started there. And uh but they have different specialties. They are two brothers. One brother has a different specialty, and the other brother has a different special ability. So in Seni Gharana Allaudin Gharana, they emphasize on purity of notes. So it has to be very pure. That is sometimes I go to India and I see people they don't know how to tune their

instruments. And that bothers me because I'm so much ingrained how to be perfect tuning. And uh because you know music comes from India, so I went to India and I said "will you tune this?," and they don't know how to tune their instruments. So, I was quite shocked. So, and uh for melodic beauty, Benares Gharana. So, you need both. You need purity of notes, and melody. So I got both.

Dakota Dry: Amazing. Um, so we were also wondering if you've experienced any difficulties while trying to pursue a career as a Hindustani vocalist and composer in the US in particular?

Rita Sahai: there is difficulty because it is not well-accepted. It's a western country. Western music is for script notes [?]. Indian music has very little scope. Right? My audience is very limited. You know, even in Indian communities, people like Bollywood music. For Indian classical, there will be very few. But I love Indian music, so I do it. For my sake.

Dakota Dry: Amazing. How is the community in the Bay Area of Indian classical musicians?

Rita Sahai: I told you it is very small. If there is Arijit Singh, or some big person is coming to sing, there will be 3000, 4000 people, Indian community I am talking about and if there is a great singer, there will be 400-500 people and if a person like Rita Sahai comes, then only 100 people come. So that is there, but I decided that I am doing music for music's sake because I love it. I like to create, it's my calling. I have to do it, so I do it.

Saveena Patel: Thank you. Our next question is about your composition process. What is the process when it comes to you and composing?

Rita Sahai: The process is this, you know, I migrated to this country. In fact I was bored with all of the compositions I had learned in India. I did not want to teach the same compositions to my students because it is so boring, so I started created my own. The other thing was, the words Indian classical music used, it was mostly composed in the 17th century. At that time there was no internet, no tape recorder, no mail service, nothing. So it was a lot of longing and crying for your husband, lover, and things like that and sending a message to a bird or the clouds. Those things do not have meaning nowadays because you are not missing anybody, you are in contact with your lover every single moment with your texting or talking so it has no meaning. So I changed all the words and created new music which fits today. That's why I started composing. When I compose it does not mean, "Oh okay now I'm going to sit down and compose." I just think, I'll wait for the moment when it comes to me. Then I write it down. I don't sit down on harmonium and say, "Oh I'm composing," no, when it comes, then you have to grab it otherwise you don't. Sometimes I'm driving and I get an idea. Sometimes I remember it, sometimes it's gone, that's the way it goes.

Saveena Patel: Wow, thank you. What a natural way to compose.

Rita Sahai: So it has to come and you know, each artist has something they want to say. That's why you write an essay right? Because you have something to say. Why does a painter paint? Because the painter expresses his feelings or her feelings to the painting. A poet to his poetry,

singer with his songs, so, when you write, when you express your feelings you have to say something. That's what you do. Does that make sense?

Saveena Patel: Yes. Thank you so much. Our next question was in reference to your teaching. So we've heard that you've taught at many colleges such as UC Davis and UC Berkeley and currently are also the director of two choir groups, so could you please share what got you into teaching?

Rita Sahai: When you get a lot of students, as a teacher, you are responsible for them. Right? Like a father or parents are responsible for children. So when the students come to me I'm responsible for them. So I have to prepare them so that they can perform. So this is what inspired me to make a group, they all can sing and there are some good singers and some bad singers. So if I combine them, the good singers will flourish, and the other singers will have a chance to sing along with them too. So that's why I created the choir. I have big programs for the choir. I'm also a very conscious environmentalist. So all of my songs are about nature or themes. So my last performance was for water, moods of water. My next performance that's coming up, it was supposed to be two years ago, because in California there were lots of fires, so the fire in the sky. That was my theme. All the songs I composed on that. But Corona happened so we are going to do it next year. So I had to change the theme a little bit. I'm calling it, Banvade Samvida. It means, not crazy but when you go you lose your self-being, that kind of wind. Sometimes the wind can be very treacherous, heavy. Sometimes wind can be soothing. So all the different moods of wind. So the next performance will be on the wind.

Dakota Dry: Beautiful. What has your experience been with teaching both non-Indian and Indian-American communities?

Rita Sahai: There are some dedicated non-Indians and they do very well and there are some not so dedicated that just do it for the sake of it. So we do a little bit of experimenting with both of them. There are some who are very good. I have some students who have been with me, who are non-Indian, American, white-Americans, for the last 30-45 years. They are learning from me. If you get into it, if you love it, then you keep on doing it. It becomes part of you and if not then you try for a couple years then go back to something else.

Dakota Dry: Beautiful, so as somebody who's taught and collaborated with non-Indian musicians and musical traditions, how have you been able to balance upholding those core traditions of classical Indian music but also allowing it to transform and remain relevant in today's times?

Rita Sahai: It's very simple because I don't know any western music. So they try to follow me to know what I am doing. Similar to that, you know. So my music is never mixed. It's pure. My music is pure because I don't know any other music. It's not that I'm against it or anything, but that's my drawback. I don't know.

Dakota Dry: How do you feel about the use of Indian music in other genres or the collaborations between genres and cultures? How do you feel in terms of appropriation or transforming the music?

Rita Sahai: Music is a universal language. It can move all of the world. Some music you like, some music you don't like. That's the way it is. I've attended some music conferences and things are different, you know, and I did not have to know their music but I like their music. So my goal is also the same. If I can move through my music, to the people who don't know anything about it and use it. That's a good music. That's my goal. Whether you understand or not, it doesn't matter. I have to give you one example, I did some composed and performed for I don't know whether you have heard this modern dancer Alonzo King. He's a very famous choreographer and he [lives] in San Francisco. So he invited me to come and compose and I mean he's a big shot. To perform for his dance...modern dance. So I did, and he said that "Rita, I have one requirement. That whenever your music comes. Each day people should when you sing people should be crying." That was his requirement. He told me "yeah I want that kind of music". And three months later when all the shows happened and after that he sent me emails of the people saying "when I heard Rita Sahai, I cried." Several people wrote to him that. It has to be that good, you know. He demanded that "when your music comes, people should cry"... and it happened. So music is such you know, you have to just feel it. Does that make sense or no? Okay good.

Jasmine Watkins: Quite often when discussing the guru-shishya uh significance and relationship, one if often referencing instrumentalists. Can you illustrate what that relationship looks like as a vocalist?

Rita Sahai: What did you say? Instrumentalists and uh teacher?

Jasmine Watkins: Yes.

Rita Sahai: It's the same. Same relationship. Instrumentalists or vocalists. Music is music. And music teacher is your parent. Let's put it this way. And it's the same relationship. And people sometimes take it wrong that in Indian music, you touch your teacher's feet, you bow to the teacher, you serve the teacher, you do to your parents and you don't complain. Why do you complain when you have to do it for teacher? Right? And the other thing is, when you touch your teacher's feet, that means you are taking out your ego and putting it on the floor. Your, it is your ego. Means you have taken out all your ego. Unless you have taken out your ego, you can not learn anything. Your mind is not open. If you have ego, then you say "oh I know all that". So you have to come with the empty mind that "I don't know anything" to the teacher. Only teacher can give you something. Does that make sense?

Jasmine Watkins: Yes, thank you.

Rita Sahai: Yeah, and one thing also you should understand that uh people say "oh this teacher is not good, this teacher is not good". It's not that, maybe you are looking for something different than that teacher is able to give you. Nobody is perfect, you know. Every person has a different strong hold. Somebody is strong in alap, somebody is strong in tal, somebody is strong in expressing feelings, somebody is strong with voice culture. So people are strong in different things. They don't have combination of everything. So, it depends what you are looking. So then if you're looking for very fast, you know exciting composition and that person is very slow

doing and “ah this is boring.” And for some people, it would be very exciting... so meditative, so meditative. It depends what you are looking for. Okay.

Jasmine Watkins: Thank you for that illustration. Um you’ve also published several of your own works including CDs, DVDs, and books. Most notable was Rangamallika, which was nominated for a GRAMMY. Can you please describe the inspiration behind that? And what that moment was like for you once you found out you were nominated?

Rita Sahai: You know getting a nomination is not a big deal because unless you get it. I don’t mention to anybody that it was nominated because unless you get it. And yeah getting it is also you know. First I thought it was a big deal, but then I realized that it’s not a big deal because it’s a record companies...how many CDs or records you sell. Based upon that, you get it. And being an Indian music musician, I don’t have that big of a market, so I can not sell that many CDs. So, unless you are a pop singer or something so it’s not possible. Even Ali Akbar Khan did not get it, my guru did not get a GRAMMY. Because his music is different, my music is different. So, it did not have any feeling to me. And forget about the politics, I’m just talking about the fact of life. Because this is a Western country, and we are Indians. We are here, but our music is not in the mainstream. We are not in the mainstream so.

Dakota Dry: What is a piece that you are the most proud of or a performance you are the most proud of or just something you think back on with lots of joy and positive memories?

Rita Sahai: A performance...?

Dakota Dry: Yeah, a performance or composition that you feel proud of or that is your favorite that you’ve done so far in your career...

Rita Sahai: You know performances are such a... I have to tell you a couple of things now cause one example is sometimes you are placed in a very different situation and then you are so scared it really comes out very good (*laughter*). I’ll give you one example, it was in the 80s. It was a big festival of India in New Jersey, okay? So they invited me to come to sing. And there were about tens of thousands of people were there, all over the world, came to hear, participate, and watch and it was a seven day festival, festival of India. Okay, so they invited me to come to sing. So, they had a lot of maybe like 3 or 4 different performances over the whole week, like 4 - 5 hundred people hall, this and that, and what happened was, a very great singer was supposed to come from India, and she could not get her visa. So she could not come so they said “could you sing for her?” I said “oh no” (*laughter*), so they asked 3-4 different, you know, musicians to fill that spot for that concert date and... but it was so good, that night before that concert there was another big instrumentalist that played, Shivkumar Sharma, he plays santoor with Zakir Hussain, I don’t know whether you have heard the name or not, he was playing. So I went to go see the hall where it was going to happen. It was like a 15,000 people hall. And the stage was, I should say, so big it was like 2-3 big houses, you know, the stage was that big. And I... my heart sank. I did not know what to do. You know, I was scared, you know, but it was so good it was night before. So through that time and I heard him, my fear went away and next day I performed that evening. I remember it, how I sounded, it was so good. So sometimes when you are scared, it comes out very good (*Laughter*). That happens. And uh, sometimes my compositions are so

good, I mean, I get lost in them. You know, It just comes to me, I don't force compose, it just comes to me. So I take it and I... and my students also like my compositions, that's another thing, and they are saying that they should not get lost so they are trying to help me and I write a book, compile all my compositions so that it is saved, not just papers or files, so.

Saveena Patel: Wow, that is so amazing, and what an interesting and amazing opportunity and experience!

So, along the lines of like performing, composing, and teaching, you know, these past years have been a little bit different with a lot of changes due to COVID-19 and I was just wondering about how you've been affected by Covid-19 as both a teacher and composer and as well as a vocalist and performer.

Rita Sahai: That's a really good question. Mostly it was good. 25 percentage was bad. 25 percentage was bad because I could not perform. Good in a sense, I hate computers (*Laughter*) and I don't know how to function computers, so I had to learn how to just do zoom, so that's why I told you, "...give me a zoom link where I can come to do it...". So I have to learn how to do zoom, so that was good thing. And with that what happened, I have students all over different places. I have a student from New York, I have a student from San Diego, I have a student in Canada, I have another student, today before you came, from Australia, so all different places people are learning from me. So that was the good part. And since you cannot go out anywhere, you cannot do anything outside, so I practice more. I spent all my time practicing, composing. So it just happens, so that way it was very good, very fruitful. So it has both sides, yeah.

Jasmine Watkins: Thank you, and I wanted to find out what are the biggest obstacles you've faced in your career as a Hindustani vocalist?

Rita Sahai: Obstacles you said? It's that you cannot make a living (*Laughter*). When you're an Indian Classical Vocalist, I mean any arts, you cannot make a living. If you get a degree in computer science or any other subject besides art, you will get a job in 4 years, have a bachelor's degree and you will get a job, you will earn some money. And here you struggle and struggle for 5 hours of practice and still, you know, you don't have a job. And people judge you very harshly. So that's the obstacle. But it does not deter me.. I could do it because I had support, financial support, that's why I could do it, and I'm doing it.

And one more thing about the zoom thing, I was interested because you know it is delayed, because of the delay, I cannot really teach them how to sing in rhythm. Yeah, rhythm is like, you know, you are missing the beat. So then I decided I had to modify my teaching. I said okay, while this is happening, at least as we're learning, and when we are in person I'll go back to those compositions and do it in rhythm. So that's the way I did it. So I took it, I modified my way of teaching. And the good thing was, people who were really shy, did not want to sing in front of people, they had to sing one by one, because here everyone cannot sing together, in Zoom. So one by one, so they were forced to practice and sing better because there are people listening to you. So I said "Okay, during Corona time, I am producing lots of solo singers." (*Laughter*). So it depends how you look at it, yeah.

Saveena Patel: Well, thank you so much for giving us your insight on these past couple years of Covid-19 and everything. Before we close everything off I just wanted to ask you if there's anything we haven't asked you that you wanted to share, or if you have any upcoming performances or anything that you would like to promote, now is the time.

Rita Sahai: I don't have much to say, something, my upcoming, I mean I'm leaving for India, and I come back in February, I'm doing a collaboration with a jazz musician. Yeah, but he said, "Rita, I will follow you. You sing whatever you want". I don't know any other thing anyways... So I'll be performing with a jazz musician. So, that's my next step, plus I'm planning to do the wind concert. Yeah, so. And things just come. I don't advertise myself, I don't look for concert. When it comes, I do it. So, I believe in just keeping at it, I just practice very hard. And when time comes, you really have to be ready. Ready means, you know, when the train comes at the station, if you are not ready you cannot climb on and get into the train and then you'll miss the train. So you have to be always ready. When the train comes to the station you hop in. That's what happens, alright?

Thank you, you all are so sweet, so nice. Very nice questions.

Saveena Patel: Well thank you so so much for this amazing opportunity, it has been so insightful and we have been so honored to have you and thank you so much for your time!

Rita Sahai: Thank you for asking me, okay. All the best, okay.

Jasmine Watkins: Thank you

Rita Sahai: Bye bye

Saveena Patel: Bye

Rita Sahai: Bye, all the best, thanks!

Dakota Dry: Thank you so much!